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Humanitarian Warrior

By Mary McGrory

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If George Bush's intensely awaited State of the Union speech had a subtitle, it would be "Dr. Schweitzer reaches for his rifle."

For weeks, a jumpy Capitol has been fretting over two questions: Would the president declare war in the House chamber with Congress and the diplomatic corps present? Or would he finally make the case for going after Saddam Hussein? He did neither.

For the first half of the speech, he painted a self-portrait of an almost stricken humanitarian, one who will confront challenges with "focus and clarity and courage." The economy? It is "recovering." Less-taxed Americans will invest and spend. Prescription drugs? Of course the elderly and poor can expect them. Patients might not like his medicine; they have to join HMOs and maybe give up favorite doctors. But he knows what's best -- for insurance companies and pharmaceutical firms. The social services that he has to slash to pay for his tax cuts? Not to worry: Big-hearted, patriotic volunteers will take up the slack. The environmentalists, who have been yapping at his heels because of his assaults on air and water, should be ashamed of themselves. He's proposing non-polluting hydrogen-powered cars.

His compassion reaches all the way to Africa, where he will take modern medicines to AIDS victims: "This nation can lead the world in sparing innocent people from a plague of nature." Could such a paragon of benevolence lead the world into the plague of war, which would disrupt or end lives and snarl the economies of several continents?

Yes, he could, and he plans to.

Midway through his hour-long speech, Bush morphed from humanitarian to warrior. His voice dropped several registers. The Republicans, who had been leaping to cheer every paragraph in his domestic recital, fell rapt.

The commander in chief brandished his weapons. At last, all thought, he would lay out all the reasons for ordering out the bombers. But the struggle in Bush's mind between his two obsessions, secrecy and war with Iraq, was unresolved. He would disclose nothing. The president is dispatching his stoic secretary of state, Colin Powell, to spill the beans to the Security Council. Then, and only then, will Americans learn why of all the villains and torturers in this world, Saddam Hussein is the one who must be exterminated. Bush told only twice-told tales about his undisputed evil.

Nothing Bush said would convince the country that Hussein, and not Osama bin Laden, is the mortal enemy. Bush made no direct link between al Qaeda and Iraq.

As a report on world affairs, the Bush review was unsatisfactory. He made no mention whatever of bin Laden -- giving a push to Democratic Sen. Byron Dorgan's name-changing quip, "Osama bin Forgotten." Bush mentioned Afghanistan several times, but in the past tense, as if it were a closed and happy chapter, even though guerrillas and U.S. forces were fighting at that same hour in southeastern Afghanistan. He gave Israel, which has just bestowed another blank check on bellicose Ariel Sharon,

one sentence, although a word from us could stanch the bloodshed and slow the flow of Arab enmity that an invasion of Iraq would undoubtedly engender.

Bush must have noticed that the greatest cheers came with his salute to the U.S. military massing on the borders of Iraq. That was the metaphor for his war strategy. Once the troops are in the field, the country will close ranks and debates will cease. The presence of the troops contributes to the "urgency" of making war. Bush simply could not, the hawks argue, bring them all home again. He doesn't need to, of course. He could send them to Afghanistan to finish the job and keep it from reverting to an al Qaeda recruiting office.

North Korea drew a defiant declaration that "different threats require different strategies" and a promise that "America and the world will not be blackmailed," although it seems that this is what is happening.

The president is hellbent on war. He's already started the euphemisms of war. "Don't say the invasion of Iraq," he chides -- it's the "liberation." He seems to have thought of everything except the Pentagon's favorite euphemism, "collateral damage." That means civilian casualties, children with big dark eyes who will die for reasons not entirely clear to everybody.

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